
Wang Wenxing, “Back to Back” With the Present

Sandrine Marchand



Édition électronique

URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/635>
DOI : 10.4000/chinaperspectives.635
ISSN : 1996-4617

Éditeur

Centre d'étude français sur la Chine contemporaine

Édition imprimée

Date de publication : 1 juin 2006
ISSN : 2070-3449

Référence électronique

Sandrine Marchand, « Wang Wenxing, “Back to Back” With the Present », *China Perspectives* [En ligne], 65 | may - june 2006, mis en ligne le 01 juin 2009, consulté le 28 octobre 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/635> ; DOI : 10.4000/chinaperspectives.635

Ce document a été généré automatiquement le 28 octobre 2019.

© All rights reserved

Wang Wenxing, "Back to Back" With the Present

Sandrine Marchand

- 1 This article seeks to connect this novel with the rest of Wang Wenxing's work by asking questions, from a historical point of view, about the relationship between the atrocities committed during the war between the communists and the nationalists and a vision of the world in which nihilism gives way to cynicism. Starting from the last page of the text, we will consider the question of evil, and question its possibility in a character who cannot face the reality of existence, past or present.
- 2 Wang Wenxin is one of the major representatives of the modern movement in Taiwan. He was born in the province of Fujian in 1939. Eight years later he moved to Taiwan with his parents, where he continued his education, before going to live in the United States, and then becoming a professor of American literature at the University of Taiwan.
- 3 In 1961, with Bai Xianrong, he started the journal *Xiandai wenxue* (Modern Literature), which launched the modernist movement. It aimed to make a break from the 1950s literature of anti-communist propaganda, which was also a form of nostalgic writing, focused on China, that of the last wave of Chinese immigrants—mostly soldiers in the nationalist army—who came to settle in Taiwan at the time of the collapse of the war against the communists on the mainland. The 1950s were the period of historically-based literature, but one based on an official history, which was both embellished and distorted in comparison to reality.
- 4 The modernist movement seeks above all to differentiate itself from official literature. It turns towards the West, which represents for the immigrant writers, still bound by memory to the Chinese mainland, an elsewhere which is further away, and for which it is possible to yearn, while a return to the past and to the Chinese mainland is closed off for an indefinite period. Regret is transformed into desire and forced exile into assertive exile.
- 5 The modernist movement deliberately and radically turns its back on the past, not only on the recent past and on the illusion of an imminent return to the territory of China

which was kept alive by the nationalist government of the Kuomintang (KMT), but also on the more distant Chinese literary past, on its cultural tradition, on both the constraints of its classical language and its Confucian morality. One of the manifestos of the journal *Xiandai wenxue* and of the modernist movement is: "We have the impression that the old forms and the old style are no longer enough to express the artistic feelings of the men of today"⁶. The prose writings of the 1930s, which stemmed from the May 4th movement, were officially banned by the government because of their socialist ideals⁷. The modernist writers, for their part, set themselves apart from this first flourish of modern Chinese literature, by rejecting the political and social role attributed to literature, as well as by considering the non engaged works of the same period as being too lyrical and sentimental. This aesthetic principle made it possible for the modernist writers to assert their independence vis-à-vis the authorities, but also vis-à-vis the historical context of a China from which they were excluded.

- 6 Research into language was one of the essential characteristics of this literary movement. However a refined and studied language did not mean a return to the language of the cultivated; on the contrary, it adapted itself to the vernacular, *bai hua* in order to play with different registers, and mix regional dialects with the jargon of the various social classes. Thus Bai Xianyong delights in provoking a collision between the refined language of the generals' milieu and the vulgar language of prostitutes. Wang Wenxing introduces orality into his texts by interjections and onomatopoeias, by making use of various written forms, of the Taiwanese phonetic system (*zhuyin fuhao*) as well as of rare sinograms.
- 7 This period has been dubbed the "literature of wandering" (*langzi wenxue*), by Bai Xianyong, but his detractors have translated this formula as "airport literature" (*jichang wenxue*) because it draws its inspiration from the West and repudiates its roots. The influence of Kafka, Joyce, Woolf, Faulkner, Dostoevsky, Chekhov and others, all foreign writers who were translated in the journal, is visible in the form as well as in the subjects chosen. The fictional characters reveal an identity tormented by the inaccessible past and the present pragmatic reality, which demands that each person struggle to survive.
- 8 However, even the modernist writers of the 1960s sought by fictional means to revive a certain memory. With Bai Xianyong, the generals who lost the war become fallen heroes, living an artificial life in the centre of a Taipei which was still on a human scale. His *Taipei People* (*Taipei ren*), which in some ways resembles Lao She's *Beijing People* (*Beijing ren*), speaks compassionately of the life of the people, grafting on to it the more refined existence of the bourgeoisie déclassée. Memories leapfrog the war, modestly recalling painful events replaced by glorious memories of brilliant youth in the pre-war period, in the prosperous circles of the big cities such as Shanghai. The analysis is essentially of the psychology of the characters, with Bai Xianyong's vivid and colourful language revealing the contradictions of the individual swept along by the course of history.

The relationship to the past in the work of Wang Wenxing

- 9 How does Wang Wenxing show his attachment to the past? In an interview with Chang Sung-shen in 1982⁸, Wang Wenxing explained that in *Family Catastrophe*, he deliberately concealed his identity as author inside that of his narrator, "because some memories are still too painful". In that novel, written between 1972 and 1973, the author distances himself from his past, which is what allows him to run through the life

of the character Fan Ye from childhood into adulthood, using his own experiences as inspiration, without becoming unduly involved. Apart from the summary, in a few almost innocuous lines, of the departure from the mainland towards the island, the return to the past is almost exempt from any relationship to historical events. Nonetheless, the atmosphere, to which we will return below, is repressive, and even depressing, laden with unavowed feelings and incomplete reflections. This is a Bildungsroman which follows the precedent of the previous stories, focused on the emotions of a young adolescent, and on his aesthetic judgements of existence.

- 10 Until the 1980s, if one examines the deliberately sparse production of Wang Wenxing, one has to recognise that not much is made of personal memories or of historical events, with one exception, the story entitled "The Dragon's Tower" (Longtian lou), written in 1967, when the author was a student in the United States. This story remained little known, like a more muffled echo of Bai Xianrong's story "National Funeral"⁹. Steven L. Riep, in a special edition of *Chong Wai Literary Monthly*¹⁰, has corrected this oversight. He shows that the collapse of the Kuomintang army is not dealt with in a way which would satisfy the authorities, but that the pain and the shame which the soldiers of the nationalist army must live with are described in considerable detail, no doubt for what is one of the very first times¹¹. It is not a question of making anti-communist statements, nor of extolling the merits of the nationalist army. Propaganda wrapped the casualties of the war in silence, the soldiers enrolled against their will, like the poet Shang Qin¹². The separation of families on both sides of the Strait and the horrors of the war are subjects that have never been broached. Wang Wenxing seems to take an interest in the fate of those who survived the war. What sort of lives do they lead, how do they interpret the past, how do they live with their memories?

The story "The Dragon's Tower"

- 11 In the story "The Dragon's Tower"¹³, former high-ranking officers in the nationalist army meet to celebrate the birthday of one of their number, who was once prefect of Taiyuan. They have not seen each other since then, and each one tells the others, in turn, of their trials and tribulations, and of their close brush with death during the flight to Taiwan.
- 12 These nationalist generals do not appear as heroes covered in glory. The only character who reflects the official discourse is the waiter, also an ex-soldier, who views his superiors with veneration. But little by little, as the narratives unfold, the humility of the characters shows through, as well as the suffering and the humiliation they have endured in silence. They all show themselves in their true light, as traumatised, desperate people, who are merely surviving their past. The heroes come down off their pedestals.
- 13 Even the idea of revenge, the hope of reconquest which had, at first, given them the strength to flee—and not to let themselves die there—is no longer a sufficient driving force. The banquet comes to an end without any celebration, and without any vows of reconquest. The heroes have become human beings again, and even pitiful beings who barely survive their physical suffering and their moral pain. To the one who lost a thumb in the fight against the communists, after the cowardly desertion of his brother-in-arms, who fled alone with his men, which is the most painful suffering? He hides his hand, but above all he hides the shame of incomprehensible betrayal. Does another officer, who was castrated, suffer more from that humiliation, or from the memories of

two days of massacres during which, in the main room of a Buddhist temple, communist executioners cut the throats of all his soldiers, one by one, after they had fallen into the hands of the communist army because of the mutiny of a squad who betrayed them to the enemy?

- 14 In these moving narratives, the horrors which are revealed were admittedly committed by communist soldiers, but the treason of the nationalist soldiers is also recalled, as well as the exactions carried out, before the war, by some of the officers who are present at this banquet, against the communist intellectuals. Every one has his share in the horror. Even though communists and nationalists, proletarian soldiers and well-born officers were enemies one to the other, they all shared the same territory and the same culture.
- 15 One of these narratives seems to be an allegory of the complex and conflict-ridden relations between soldiers on the two sides: a nationalist officer who had once unjustly punished one of his soldiers, finds himself aboard the latter's boat, for he has now become a ferryman. Together they cross a river, the silent and menacing soldier having recognised his erstwhile superior, who himself remains unaware of this. The officer wants to cross the river in order to get back to his family. When he arrives, he finds the house empty and is told by a neighbour that his daughter has been raped and killed, and his wife and his two sons murdered. Is there any reason not to throw himself into the river? The ferryman takes him back to the other bank. The humiliated ex-soldier then reveals himself and, paradoxically, exhorts him to go on living and to flee... Both of them are men without qualities, afloat on the Styx, and they share the same fate and the same distress.
- 16 These fictional narratives contain a kernel of truth: they bear witness to the victims of the war, particularly since light has not been shed completely on the events of that time.
- 17 In these exact and moving narratives, Wang Wenxing spares us no detail. He draws a remorseless picture of the war. However, it is the feeling of compassion towards these men which predominates. Since arriving on the island, the generals have had to earn a living: one is the servant of a foreign priest in a church, another raises chickens, two of them run a noodle stall together. Another, now a coalman, has not dared come to the banquet. All of these soldiers, who had not prepared for retirement, have been discarded; once generals who commanded whole armies, they have become men of the people who have to earn a living to survive. This banquet is probably the last real festivity in their miserable lives. The waiter, who has not missed a word of these narratives, no longer views the generals with the same respect as before. Now he can see only their defects, the venerable prefect falling asleep with his head on the table, the general who drops his fork because of his mutilated hand, one whose trousers are threadbare, another who is going bald.
- 18 The fate of these soldiers remains a taboo subject in Taiwanese society¹⁴. Nobody pays them any attention. Not the modernist writers who turn away from the day-to-day reality of Taiwan, nor the nativist writers who take into account only the native population of the island and who consider, quite rightly, the arrival of the nationalist government as a new form of oppression, nor contemporary literature either, which is centred on Taiwanese identity and the aborigines. None of them care about these unemployed soldiers who are reduced to finding their way like vulgar immigrants,

unwelcomed by the local population. Who could possibly care about their fate, since officially they belong to the upper class of society?¹⁵

The break with the past does not mean lack of awareness

- 19 After this narrative, Wang Wenxing turned away from both the past and from collective memory. Thirty years pass before one finds an image of such intense violence as those described in "The Dragon's Tower". Wang Wenxing first contributed to a critique of traditional Chinese society, and the family in particular, in *Family Catastrophe*, showing in this way that he favoured individual freedom, and the influence of the West, as well as the quest for language for its own sake. This did not mean that he turned his back on the reality of Taiwan, for in this novel one can clearly see the poverty and the difficult relations with the natives and the aborigines. The narrator is critical of the attitude of the immigrants—such as the father—who, despite their inferior position in society, look down on those who are even lower on the ladder than they are. In this novel of a high aesthetic quality, Wang Wenxing allows a certain cruelty to filter through, which intensifies as the narrative progresses, while the narrator's lucid view of family and society leads the author to sharpen more and more the cutting edge of a scathing style. If one considers that this novel does not confine itself to the family sphere, the rejection and flight of the father nevertheless leave some doubt as to their meaning. Why is there such steadily increasing brutality on the part of the son, and above all why, on the part of the father, is there such a long diminishment of his personality, a weakness, a lack of pugnaciousness, which leads to a complete indifference to everything? Is there to be found in *Backed Against The Sea* an answer to the fruitless search for the father?
- 20 Over the course of twenty five years, Wang Wenxing wrote *Backed Against The Sea*, a picaresque novel about Ye, a character whose identity is vague. He is less than nothing, a nonentity who arouses no consideration or compassion. He was born nowhere, on no particular date. His identity is mutilated, there is no way of knowing if he is an immigrant or a native, *waishengren* or *bendiren* (which in a certain way puts an end to the dichotomy between the two major movements in Taiwanese literature in the 1960s and 70s, of which this novel can be considered a synthesis. The story is rooted in local life, its characters are the little people, penniless fishermen and grasping whores, and it takes place in a seaport which is forgotten by the world. The author no longer shares his subjective, intellectual thoughts; he combines formal experimentation with the exploitation of local dialects, as well as the intensive use of the Taiwanese phonetic transcription system. The novel is also realistic because the narrative takes place entirely in the small fishing port of Nanfang'ao, where the author himself did his military service. The place however represents only the enormous stage of an ancient amphitheatre, closed in by the mountains and presenting a circular arc to the sea. On this stage, a few characters are driven to play a pitiful role. Wang Wenxing stretches the realistic aspect by denying this fishing port, which in reality is prosperous, the sight of the least fish. Thus we have to acknowledge that as a picaresque novel, it provides a pastiche of all the genres, ridiculing them in order to criticise itself¹⁶.
- 21 There is another clear difference between the modernist novel and the nativist novel. In nativist literature, theoretically one must find an empathetic view of a social class that is oppressed and reduced to dire straits. This is far from being the case here. Nevertheless, certain short stories by Chen Yingzhen, which describe the world of the little people, or Huang Chunming's *The Gong*, for example, do not give the impression

of there being any compassion on the author's part. One should perhaps concede that these authors have not expressed a cynicism as radical as that of Wang Wenxing.

- 22 Here the "external" monologue¹⁷ tells of the incidents in the life of this miserable wretch, at the end of his tether, from divination to dog hunting, including waiting for employment in a demented government department, and cock-and-bull stories of love with disreputable girls. This observation of the self as if it were another, deformed and dislocated, tends to demonstrate that man has no place in the very society which has produced him. He is an exile without an exile's status, the native of a native country that does not recognise him as its own, a man without a past, who experiences the present moment without any depth. He is an incarnation of a consciousness at odds with the world, in which it is immersed against its will, but which tries at a crucial moment in life to see itself as it is. *Backed Against The Sea* might be the pseudobiography of a less than nobody left to his own devices in an absurd world.
- 23 Without going into the detail of the narrative, we might wonder what could have been the driving force behind such a "verbal frenzy", behind such a deployment of ridiculous and absurd situations that reach the level of absolute nonsense. All the more so as there seems to be no continuity to link this novel with the author's previous writings, and even less to his essays, which are always measured, prudent and precise. The only clue that Wang Wenxing seems to give to justify this novel and to situate it in the continuity of a work and an author—if such a justification is necessary—is the last page of the novel. Separated from the narrative by a blank page, it is added as a "supplement" or an "annex". It could easily not have been written, and the novel would have remained open on Ye's anguished call for help in the pitch darkness of the tiny room in which he lives. Wang Wenxing did not want to leave it at that, but chose to finish off his character and to leave the reader with a feeling of disgust.
- 24 This picaresque novel unfolds without deviating from the genre, which calls for the death of the hero. It is at the very last moment that the hand of the master appears, with the author becoming the executioner of his character, and in a certain sense, his own executioner. This outburst of violence strikes a creature who is barely human, after four hundred pages of following his senseless tribulations, in order to make him unreal, to uproot any feeling of compassion, so that he is given the death he deserves, death by his own hand, when, having lost all dignity, he no longer considers himself to be a man. One perceives a gratuitous act, a desire to do evil. The reader also feels as if he has been taken in; from the beginning, the death of the hero was imminent, and the author has merely delayed his end, for no reason, to prolong his suffering as long as possible. Wang Wenxing makes his readers into accomplices in the crime he is going to commit.
- 25 "Annex: This sinister ending does not arise from any necessity internal to the narrative, because of the very fact that the latter is a series of sketches with no logical connection between them. Even the sky seems to mock the fate of this total loser, since for the first time in a novel where the rain has been constant, the weather has now turned fine. The sky rejoices at the disappearance from the earth of this useless and even noxious creature that is a human being. A hiatus appears between the main narrative of the adventures of this man and the annex, which describes a death by torture, and which perhaps reveals a link between the novel and Taiwan's past.
- 26 The image of the disfigured narrator, humiliated and annihilated, can be seen as a concentrate, a subliminal image of the narratives of the officers in the short story "The

Dragon's Tower". Ye's corpse is the body of a soldier brutally murdered by the enemy. It is in any case its obsessive fear, the image of a "self" that had fought in the war between the communists and the nationalists. As Edward Gunn¹⁸ reminds us, the hero of *Backed Against The Sea* is a soldier who, on his return to civilian life, fell into evil ways, lived in the gangster underworld, and then fled to a small fishing port. The narrator, a soldier at the time of the collapse, ends up by sharing in its fate fifty years later. And yet it is worse than that, for the war is over, nobody will remember him, he will not even have an anonymous place in history; he lies outside history. From a formal point of view, his death is also in an annex, banished beyond the novel.

- 27 Ye is one of those men who, having been subjected to the trauma of the war and cast aside, no longer have any bearings or any future. As Freud pointed out, the distress of the survivors of the First World War, as well as those who were born after it, makes them incapable of judgement and full of an immense sense of disillusionment: "the individual who did not himself become a combatant, and thus a tiny cog in the gigantic war machine, feels troubled in his bearings and inhibited in his ability to achieve anything"¹⁹.
- 28 The survivors of history are ghosts, but also sniggerers who no longer believe in anything; they have seen the true face of human beings. In *Backed Against The Sea* one can see re-emerging a diffuse image of war, which reduces men to killing machines, and strips them of all conscience, leaving only their drive. At any moment, as Freud states, "the reorganisation of drives which is the basis of our aptitude for civilisation can also be made to regress—permanently or temporarily—by the interventions of life"²⁰.
- 29 Would it not be with Celine's *Journey To The End Of Night* rather than Joyce's *Ulysses* than one could compare this narrative of Ye's derisory existence, of his pointless adventures, his wickedness and his misfortunes with women? Celine's novel also is a post-war novel, a mixture of crude stories devoid of any idealism and stylistic experimentation, where lyrical transcendence mixes with vulgar language.
- 30 The answer offered by the author to the trauma of history is not compassion but sarcasm, a way of avoiding a past that cannot be looked at directly, a memory that has remained hunched up, a hidden potentiality. It is not an emergency reaction, but perhaps the remnants of a historical past that has remained in the shadows, of a mutilation that has been rubbed out but will not heal. With the passage of thirty years between "The Dragon's Tower" and the last page of *Backed Against The Sea*, is the novel not the result of an underground exploration of what is unspoken and buried deep in consciousness?
- 31 It is probably not only the "still-painful memories" referred to by the author, but also a reaction to a writing of history that seeks to keep men in a state of complete illusion about their reasons for existence. The image of horror, both repulsive and disillusioned, which brings the novel to a close, is a reflection of a disillusioned view of history and of society, whether these be Taiwanese or not. Man is no more than a corpse thrown about by the waves, murdered by his own kind. Far from Mengzi's natural morality of spontaneous and uncalculating help for others²¹, Wang Wenxing offers an immorality which is at the same time a principled amorality: man is completely aware that he is immoral, because he has experienced the hypocrisy of all morality, but also because he is fundamentally amoral.

A cynical look at the future

- 32 That last page, which one cannot turn, not only takes us back, but also leads us towards the present and the future. The novel seeks to look at the hidden but very present face of both our civilisation and all of us individually, to fix a look devoid of any illusion on oneself and others, whatever the political or economic conditions.
- 33 What has usually been highlighted is the relationship between Wang Wenxing's novels and the contemporary context of his writing, with socio-cultural and even economic explanations being brought to bear on it, but one could also carry out a diachronic analysis of the novels, which links them to past events.
- 34 Rereading Wang Wenxing's first novel, *Family Catastrophe*, which caused a scandal in the 1970s, the debates of which were closely supervised by the government, which perceived a reaction against tradition, one wonders about its relationship with history. The question of whether this moral scandal was also based on a historical scandal was not raised. The political dimension, in a different context, would have been more evident, because the link between family and politics, between father and power, has long been highlighted in the Chinese tradition. Thus the disappearance of the father can also be interpreted as the abdication of the political authorities in the face of the past, and their inability to assume responsibility for Taiwanese society as a whole. Astonishment arises not at the son who rebels, but at the father who goes away. It is he who is *déclassé* by society, forgotten by all, the man destined for endless wandering, with no burial place. He is an immigrant from the mainland, a minor functionary from a cultivated background. Forced to flee with his family to Taiwan, he becomes the object of the criticism and of the contempt of his son. Like Ye²² in *Backed Against The Sea*, the father in *Family Catastrophe* has no contacts in this Taiwanese society, and finds work only thanks to his fellow countrymen from China. In the end, the father has remained an exile, powerless and devoid of belonging or belief. Here again, is this not the mirror image of the immigrants arriving like conquerors, rich and powerful men trampling over everything that lies in their way? Of course the nationalist army was not made up of rich and powerful families alone, it was followed by a whole middle and poorer class which had trouble finding a place in a milieu which did not want it and which it did not want. Thus even *Family Catastrophe*, which hitherto has been studied in its relation to morality and society, deserves to be subjected to the spotlight of history.
- 35 The inability to "make one's memory", to use a term from psychoanalysis, can lead to a degrading vision of man. In *Backed Against The Sea*, this is coupled with a critique of the modern world. This critique also bears on the economic prosperity that has come to compensate for defeat in the war. In contrast with the narratives of Li Ang or Chen Yingzhen, which reflect the prosperous city of Taipei and the world of business, Wang Wenxing reveals the weaknesses of the consumer society. Asia's economic prosperity appears here more as a double failure, dismissing the conflicting ideologies on either side of the Strait, without pronouncing in favour of either of them. Taiwan and China can continue criticising each other, even though they have separated. In the last analysis both countries have arrived at the same absence of meaning, the same loss of values, the same absurdity. Capitalism and Marxism are afloat in the same boat on the River Lethe. Forgetting history has once again brought them face to face or rather back to back: the title *Backed Against The Sea*, the first meaning of which is to express the situation of a man who has run out of possible solutions, perhaps also suggests the idea of someone who turns his back on the mainland, and on the world in general.

36 While with writers such as Chen Yingzhen in particular, as well as so many others before and after him, Taiwan's memory is being reconstituted—historical events have been revealed and acknowledged—, when it comes to relations between Taiwan and China it seems that we are still at the first beginnings. On the one hand, the dominant discourse, centred entirely on the island, does not concern itself with that subject, and on the other the Waishengren themselves have a contradictory vision of China, divided between their nostalgic viewpoint and the contemporary situation. The short stories, which attempt to deal with this relationship, such as those of Su Weizhen²³, remain fairly artificial. The characters from the mainland are pale ghosts without any consistency, even though one knows that they have had atrocious experiences. A Taiwanese writer does not have direct access to the intimate experience of what happened on the mainland. Even Chen Yingzhen, when he depicts a meeting with a Taiwanese who has returned from the mainland, does not affect us as much as when he shows communists being sentenced in Taiwan²⁴. It is not the same history; the contemporary history of China remains a strange and distant rumour to Taiwanese writers.

Putting an end to the lack of a future

37 There is thus a probable connection between the various works of Wang Wenxing, between the stories and the novels, an underground connection, which, far from being clearly stated, can only repeat itself in the form of a drive. The narrator of *Backed Against The Sea*, through his attempts at aggression which are doomed to failure²⁵, reveal in him the impotence of a soldier without any future, a man who is only capable of repeating the cruelty and absurdity of which he has been a witness if not a victim. The impossibility of analysing history and of constructing one's memory leads to the perpetuation of acts of violence and to a nihilistic vision of existence. Rejection of the past leads to rejection of the future. It leads in particular to the impossibility of imagining one's own future in the inevitable confrontation with old age and death. Death—even death of natural causes—is violence²⁶; to those who have turned away from the past, it is unacceptable. After a certain amount of time, it is no longer possible to face one's past, it is too late, and one can no longer give oneself the luxury of memory. What was painful has become unbearable.

38 The future is blocked by death, as here with the corpse floating on the horizon.

39 This is when one should mention the strange profession that Ye pursues in the fishing port, which has been reduced to total poverty: that of divination. This scene, which turns its back on the world, on both the present and the past, wonders about the future, worries ironically about what is going to happen. It is this lost soul, who has reached the end of the world, who is asked to tell fortunes. The irony of fate reaches its peak.

40 Translated from the French original by Michael Black

NOTES DE FIN

1. The first part was written between 1974 and 1979, and the second between 1980 and 1997. Wang Wenxing (Wang Wen-Hsing), *Backed Against The Sea*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University East Asia Program, 1993.
2. Wang Wenxing (Wang Wen-Hsing), *Family Catastrophe*, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 1995.
3. *Jiabian* and *Shiwu duanpian xiaoshuo*, Taipei, Hongfan shudian, 1978; *Xiaoshuo moyu*, Taipei, Hongfan shudian, 2002; *Xingyu lou suixiang*, Taipei, Hongfan shudian, 2003.
4. We will not dwell on the language itself, despite its being at the centre of Wang Wenxing's thought, because we have already dealt with this subject, even if incompletely, in another article "La possession de la langue dans les romans de Wang Wenxing" (The possession of language in the novels of Wang Wenxing), in Annie Curien (ed.), *Ecrire au présent, débats littéraires franco-chinois*, (Writing in The Present, French-Chinese Literary Debates), Paris, Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 2004, pp. 189-200.
5. *Chong Wai Literary Monthly* has devoted a volume to the work of Wang Wenxing, Vol. 30, No. 6, 2001, Taipei, 447 pp.
6. Chang Sung-sheng Yvonne and Michelle Yeh (eds.), *Modernism and the Nativist Resistance: Contemporary Fiction from Taiwan*, Durham, Duke University Press, 1993.
7. The Chinese writers of the 1920s and 1930s were banned by the Nationalist government when it arrived in 1949, but to the Taiwanese intellectuals who had lived under the Japanese colonisation, these writings were accessible and influenced the work of some.
8. Chang Sung-sheng, *op. cit.*, p 117.
9. Bai Xianyong (Pai Hsien-yung), *Wandering in the Garden, Waking from a Dream: Tales of Taipei Characters*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1982.
10. *Op. cit.*, pp. 93-114.
11. While the value of a work of fiction is not the same as that of an eyewitness account, nevertheless Kant conceded its veracity in his *Anthropology*: "...and yet characters such as those drawn by Molière or Richardson had to acquire their *fundamental traits* from an observation of human actions and passions; for the fact is that, while they are exaggerated in degree, they nevertheless must, in terms of quality, concord with human nature". Paris, Garnier Flammarion, 1993, p. 44.
12. Shang Qin, (Shang Ch'in) born in Sichuan in 1930, was kidnapped by a local army and brought to Taiwan in 1950.
13. To be published in 2007 along with ten other stories by the Editions Zulma.
14. Cf. in particular Fiorella Allio, "The New Guardians of Memory. Documentary film-makers and Taiwan", *China Perspectives*, No. 37, September-October 2001, pp. 52-59.
15. Another story, entitled "Two Wives", tells of the relationship between Taiwan and the mainland. Through the story of the remarriage of a man from the mainland to a Taiwanese woman, one learns of the famines that ravaged China in the 1960s, and of the inevitable death of the first wife and of her two children, repressed by the husband who is caught in the trap of his second marriage. Here again, despite the cruelty of the second wife who remains indifferent to the fate of the first, the author feels pity for his characters.

16. Cf Alain Montendon, *Le Roman européen au XVIIIe siècle* (The European Novel in the 18th Century), Paris, P.U.F, 1999, pp. 139-140.
17. It is indeed a sort of transcript of an oral monologue that everyone can read. When the narrator calls himself Miss Ouyang, radio hostess, the reader has the impression that what he is reading is being broadcast live on the airwaves.
18. Edward Gunn has translated *Beihai de ren* into English. He has written an article "Beihai de ren yiji fanyizhun" in *Chong Wai Literary Monthly*, *op. cit.*, p. 115.
19. Sigmund Freud, *Essais de psychanalyse* (Essays in Psychoanalysis), Paris, Payot, 1981.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
21. "Human nature is food and sex", says Gaozi, a disparager of Mengzi. This is quoted by the narrator at the beginning of the novel.
22. The son in *Family Catastrophe* is called Fan Ye, which will be the subject of a forthcoming study.
23. Su Weizhen, *Retrouvailles* (Reunion), Paris, Bleu de Chine, 2006, provides four stories on this theme.
24. In the story *Guixiang*, *Chen Yingzhen*, *xiaoshuoji* No. 6 1995-2001, Taipei, Hongfan shudian, 2001.
25. On several occasions, a penniless Ye tries to attack old people to steal their money, but fails.
26. Cf. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et Infini, Essai sur l'extériorité* (Totality and Infinity, An Essay on Exteriority), La Haye, Nijhoff, 1961, pp. 208-213.

RÉSUMÉS

Wang Wenxing's new novel *Backed Against The Sea* (*Beihai de ren*), was written over two different periods of time and took twenty-five years to complete¹. It is different from his previous work, from his novel *Family Catastrophe* (*Jiabian*)², which made him famous because of the moral scandal it caused, from his collection of stories, as well as from his recent publications, two collections of *sanwen* on various subjects³. This new text breaks away from a style of writing which, despite the carefully thought-out daring of his first novel, remained classical, and here becomes an experimental exploration of shifts of meaning within the framework of the novel⁴. This book has been compared to Joyce's *Ulysses*, but such a comparison is of no help in following the exhausting rhythmic shifts between words and sounds that govern this novel, which is in the form of a long monologue. It initiates a synthesis of the two literary movements of the 1960s and 1970s, modernist literature on the one hand, since it pursues a search for language which challenges understanding, and nativist literature on the other, in that it is set in a small fishing village and its characters are miserable wretches on the fringe of society. One can also perceive in this very combination the hybrid character peculiar to post-modern literature. It is a novel that prompts exegesis. It is more aimed at academic speculation than at the ordinary reader. However, it is not so much the writing of discontinuity, of the collapse which conforms to post-modern norms, as writing which, taking on the picaresque genre—the un-idealistic novel par excellence—not only describes a laughable world, but mocks itself as well. Moreover, in the author's own words, this book, which rejects any form of categorisation, is "a picture of the human condition with universal applicability"⁵.